

The Mustang Chronicles:

Thieving Mustang

A Novella

by

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I

Mustang Duryea slept late that chill February morning, curled up beneath the quilt knowing there'd be no tour groups to lead around Assisi in the snowy off-season.

A persistent sun peeking through drawn mauve curtains finally convinced her to rise. She shivered as she scurried from the bedroom to the wood stove in the flat's tiny sitting room, jerking open the iron door to insert the last two split logs.

That would be her main errand for the day.

The other, she determined upon opening cabinets over the kitchenette sink, would be a bit of grocery shopping. One slice of bread would make a poor breakfast.

Checking her cash reserves, stashed in an old coffee can on the top shelf, she could afford to indulge her sweet tooth, a fact which brightened her mood considerably.

She shuffled to the bathroom, showered and towel-dried long, auburn tresses, taming the tangles with a sturdy plastic brush. She slipped into a hooded green sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers, pulling a battered parka over her shoulders as she descended warped stairs to street level.

The Piazza San Rufino radiated silence, even at mid-morning. A biting wind would have driven even the heartiest tourists indoors for the day.

Having grown up in Montana, this weather didn't bother the woman. She'd grown accustomed to trudging through three feet of snow to feed her horse, Heartbeat, or riding to far-flung pastures ensuring the stock's water troughs were free of ice. Compared to those days, this was a picnic.

Down a steep incline, she turned a corner, suddenly retreating when a Fiat approached along the narrow lane. She jogged the rest of the way to her destination.

"Buongiorno, Rosa!" she hailed, entering the Gran Caffé bakery.

The rotund manager responded, "Buongiorno, Signorina!"

Mustang surveyed the curved glass display case filled with tantalizing pastries. As she debated between creme horns and chocolate drizzled cheesecake, she overheard a man at the cash register struggling to make himself understood.

He spoke English; the staff only spoke Italian, as Mustang had learned in the years since fleeing Scotland for the cozy hillside city.

She had no difficulty understanding their rapid patter, though, thanks to the power over nature bequeathed to her by her late grandfather, scientist and occultist Jack Parsons.

Instinct advising her to ignore the scene - foreigners had a way of getting their point across eventually - she detected the rumpled figure's increased agitation and pitied him.

"Excuse me," she ventured, edging beside him. "Can I help?"

"All I want is a dozen of those filled jobs on the top row and a cup of coffee," he grumped with a distinct British Cockney accent.

Mustang signaled the clerk along the cases. She whispered the order, receiving a nod of acknowledgment. Soon, a large waxed-paper bag contained the treats, with an insulated cup of steaming brew beside it on the counter.

"Thank ye so much, me dear," the customer gushed as he pulled a 100 Euro bill from his wallet.

"No problem."

"Ye're obviously American," he noted, his mouth slanting oddly upward to the right as he spoke. "'ow do ye come to know Italian so well?"

She bristled. "When you live somewhere long enough, you pick up the lingo."

"That's true, innit." Pocketing his change, he picked up his purchase and lumbered toward the door. "G'day to ye!"

From her place near the oven, Rosa squinted at Mustang. "What was that all about, Signorina?"

"What do you mean?"

"You spoke to that man in Italian, and he replied in English."

Mustang moaned, "Oh, hell..."

Rosa heard every word she uttered in her native tongue, while the man had heard her in his. It was bound to confuse those who had no idea of how she accomplished the feat.

Pretending she'd forgotten her money, she shrugged and made a hasty exit.

Her stomach grumbled as she emerged; what a foul way to start her day!

Whirling toward the Basilica Santa Chiara, she nearly collided with this unwitting acquaintance, juggling the sack, the coffee and a laminated map of Assisi that threatened to go airborne with the wind.

"I'm sorry, Missy," he apologized.

She seized the fluttering sheet. "Come here," she directed, yanking him toward a recessed doorway. "Now, what are you trying to do?"

"I'm tryin' to find Santa Maria Maggiore," he muttered.

"The best thing to do is hire a reliable tour guide."

"Kinda tough, innit, when a shopkeeper down the road told me they don't work this time of year."

“That’s not... entirely accurate.”

“Ye know someone...”

“I’m a tour guide.”

“Would ye...”

Hazel orbs rolled skyward. “I’ve got nothing else to do today.” She assessed his thin frame, Romanesque nose, sunken brown eyes and thick brows behind round, wire-rimmed, tinted glasses, wide forehead tapering along his jaw to a narrow chin. “Drink your coffee, and we’ll get started.”

She folded the map and tucked it in his black cashmere overcoat, feeling an odd bulge beneath his arm.

A shoulder holster?

As he drained the cup, she queried, “Where are you from?”

“Originally?”

She nodded.

“London.”

Too convenient, she mused, regretting the impulse to assist him, especially if he was an undercover Interpol agent, or worse.

“There are better places to holiday at this time of year, Mister...” she droned.

“Peters. Rick Peters. This is me first ‘oliday in nearly a decade, and I may not ‘ave another chance...”

“Health problems?”

Pitching the empty container in a nearby trash bin, they trekked up the Corso Giuseppe Mazzini. “A few years ago, I suffered a major ‘eart attack.” He considered briefly. “A series of them, to be truthful.”

“Eh?”

“The first one sent me to ‘ospital, and over the course of the next week, I ‘ad a total of 13. I actually died for more than a minute.”

“You either had great doctors, or it wasn’t your time.”

“A bit of both, I think.”

Veering right along the Via Sant’Agnese, he stumbled on the stones. Mustang caught him before he fell, detecting scrawny bones beneath the cloth.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” she pressed.

“Sure. Since I got out, I’ve been exercisin’ regularly...”

“Sometimes, older folks don’t have the stamina...”

Peters jerked from her grasp. “Old? I’m just 46!”

The salt-and-pepper mop and arthritic digits made him appear over 70.

“Sorry. The last thing I want is for you to get hurt.”

“I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Past noon and into early afternoon, they traversed the city, visiting numerous churches. In each, Peters knelt gingerly in a pew and prayed. Mustang wondered if he was seeking a cure for his ailments.

Quite a few tourists came to Assisi with that intention, and departed unsatisfied.

St. Francis had often debated the faith of these souls over evening chess games.

“If they genuinely believe, they wouldn’t need to travel to certain sites,” concluded Assisi’s renowned son. “They could be healed in their own living room.”

Yet, she waited at the rear of each house of worship as her companion offered his petitions, sometimes lighting an electric candle before a carved statue perched on a side altar.

En route to the Cathedral of San Rufino, jewelry in a shop window caught his eye. “Could we stop?” he requested.

“Sure.”

The dim interior made it difficult to see details on the rings, necklaces and earrings. Mustang provided translator services as Peters asked to see items from the glass case, admiring each when presented.

Then, he spilled the contents of the waxed paper bag atop the collection, to the owner’s audible frustration.

“Tell ‘im I’m sorry!” Peters squealed, gathering the pastries with a sweeping motion.

Wiping powdered sugar residue on his coat, he made a hasty retreat as Mustang offered suitable apologies for the inconvenience.

Reaching San Rufino, Peters’ legs seemed to rebel against further progress. “I’d... best be gettin’ back to me ‘otel,” he remarked. “Will ye be available tomorrow?”

“Probably.”

“Can I ring ye?”

“I... don’t have a phone.”

“Then, how...”

“I’ll meet you here at 10:00.”

Peters beamed, passing her a 100 Euro bill. “Grand.”

As Mustang crossed the piazza, his steady gaze made her nervous. Rather than reveal where she lived, she diverted toward the Gran Caffé.

Passing one of the few open souvenir shops, the proprietor waved to her. She stepped inside, a wind gust nearly ripping the glass door from its hinges.

“How are you, Giovanni?” she greeted.

“Myself, I’m fine. Some of my business associates, not so much.”

“How so?”

“You’ve not heard?” the lean, aging Italian prodded.

“Heard what?”

“A number of shops and churches have been robbed in the past few days.”

“Robbed?”

“Three jewelry stores and the poor boxes from Chiesa Nuova, San Stefano and Santa Margherita.”

Stunned, Mustang grit her teeth. She and Rick Peters hadn’t visited those churches during their rounds. What sort of reprobate...

The wall-mounted phone jangled, shocking her from this reverie. Giovanni raised the instrument to his ear. “Pronto.”

He listened, mumbled a few expletives, then broke the connection.

“What is it?” Mustang puzzled.

“That was my brother, one of the Carabinieri. Another jewelry store was robbed an hour ago, and two more churches.”

“Ludicrous!”

The woman departed, her enthusiasm for buying pastries diminished. She meandered to the grocers, selecting a variety of staples and presenting the bill Peters had given her.

Bespectacled eyes examined the paper. “Signorina, is this a joke?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is not real.”

Mustang tasted blood as she bit her lip. Since arriving in Assisi two years earlier, she’d been stiffed by some tour groups, underpaid by others. What sort of buffoon would deliberately pass counterfeit money?

She dug in her jeans for the 20 Euros from her reserve fund. “Sorry. You can trash that.”

“No, no, Signorina. This will be passed on to the Carabinieri, to be matched with the others...”

“What others?”

“A bulletin was sent to all shops in Assisi yesterday. There’s been a rash of these phony 100 Euro notes...”

“Oh, hell...”

Two plastic bags in tow, Mustang hurried through the Piazza del Comune to the Gran Caffé. “Rosa!”

The baker, cheeks wet with tears, approached from her office. “Signorina, have you heard?”

“Yes. I’m... sorry.”

“It’s my fault, really. I am behind on my paperwork, and hadn’t read the notice from the Carabinieri. But, my clerk is to blame, too. She should have felt the difference in the paper... We cannot afford to take such a loss when our trade is so sparse.” The flour-coated rolling pin smacked the counter. “If I ever get my hands on that man...”

“You will, Rosa, I assure you.”

“You know where he is?”

“No, not at the moment. But he will be in the Piazza San Rufino tomorrow morning.”

“*Bene*. Then the Carabinieri can arrest him.”

Mustang could imagine the scene: a squad of uniformed police converging on the feeble Peters.

Why, though, did he feel it necessary to circulate counterfeit bills? He’d mentioned not having a holiday for years, was this his way of financing a dream vacation?

She hadn’t asked him about his job, or his background - she’d curbed her idle curiosity since inheriting her grandfather’s power and wreaking havoc not only in Montana, but Scotland before fleeing to the Continent.

Tucking a bag of creme horns into the sack with bread, milk and cereal, Mustang trudged up the steep incline toward her flat, not entirely surprised to see two Carabinieri escorting a raving, handcuffed prisoner along the Via Dono Doni.

Chestnut maned and bearded, the trim gentleman virulently protested his apprehension, claiming he had no idea how the roll of fake 100 Euro bills he’d pulled from his red quilted jacket had come into his possession.

He’d obviously crossed paths with Rick Peters, she chuckled quietly.

Then, their eyes met.

He might’ve changed his clothes, shoes, demeanor, even hair, and shed the thick glasses, but there could be no mistaking that exquisite nose and those brown orbs.

It *was* Rick Peters and, suspending the automatic translation in her brain, he was babbling in fluent Italian!

II

Among the traits Mustang despised in humans: playing her for a fool. From the day she killed Jack Parsons during an arcane ritual and his power over nature fell to her, people had tried to deceive and manipulate her.

Didn't they know she could bring the buildings down on their heads?

She'd been responsible for quite a few deaths over the course of 14 years, for that matter.

An unspoken directive reinstated the translation of her words into the individuals' language of origin.

"Hold on there, gentlemen," she addressed the police officers.

"Out of the way, please, Signorina," objected the taller of the pair, whose shoes suddenly stuck to the paving stones, preventing forward progress. He glared at his partner, flustered.

"Who are you?" she asked their prisoner.

The man growled, "My name is Riccardo Peters."

"You are Italian?"

Shackles dropped from his wrists and she grabbed his arm, leading him along the lane. His biceps measured twice the circumference of the man she'd ushered around the city earlier in the day.

Perplexed, the youth flexed elegant fingers. "Born in Rome. My father worked in the British Embassy..."

"Rick Peters?"

"No, Signorina. Maurice Peters is my father. Rick is his elder brother."

So, uncle and nephew roamed within Assisi's walls.

Both up to no good.

"How did you get the counterfeit money?" she demanded.

"When I had breakfast with my uncle this morning, I think he planted it on me in revenge for..."

Riccardo fell silent, staring at a stray tiger-striped cat scrounging for table scraps.

"Where is he lodging?" she hissed.

"The Hotel Giotto on the Via Fontebella."

The Carabinieri had sense enough to bend and untie their dress shoes, scurrying to Mustang in stocking feet. Their hold on the suspect restored, they spewed obscenities at her as they dragged him toward their headquarters in the Piazza del Comune.

Laughing, she shouted after them, handcuffs dangling. “I think you forgot something, boys!”

The squat sergeant trotted back and snatched the manacles from her grasp. Confronting his displeasure, she whispered playfully, “Might want to fetch your shoes, too.”

Freed of their restraints, he scooped up the patent leather wing-tips, scowling when he stepped on a sharp pebble.

Mustang hauled her groceries up narrow stairs to her third floor flat overlooking the Piazza San Rufino. She sank on the metal kitchenette chair long enough to enjoy a tumbler of milk and two cylindrical pastries before setting out to find Rick Peters.

Enough snow had fallen to coat the streets in a slick film. Numbing digits zipped her parka against the brisk wind, trodding gingerly downhill. Reaching her destination took twice as long as usual, even with the piazzas mostly deserted.

Her hair dampened by melting flakes when she tramped inside the posh hotel, she shook droplets on the gold carpet.

A stern, balding concierge frowned at her from the polished wood reception desk. “May I help you?”

“I’m here to see Richard Peters.”

Consulting a computer screen deepened his wrinkles. “Signore Peters checked out this morning.”

“Oh, hell...” Mustang spat, reversing course.

The ascent provided plenty of time to ruminate about a situation she acknowledged should be none of her concern. The Carabinieri, while not the best law enforcement agency, had the capacity to track criminals with modern technology. Whatever friction existed between Rick Peters and his nephew, her interference could very well generate chaos, as so often occurred when she grew angry.

And, she definitely felt that emotion welling in the present moment, mentally appraising the record of horrible acts committed under such conditions.

If Rick Peters had left the Hotel Giotto that morning, where had he stashed his luggage? He’d been carrying none when they met... unless he moved to different lodgings to avoid Riccardo after...

An attempt to clear her mind of the confusing scenario, she paused at the edge of the Piazza del Comune.

Given the abundance of hotels, bed and breakfasts and guest houses in the city, Peters might be anywhere - except his physical limitations would make it troublesome to transport even rolling suitcases very far.

Worse if he were fighting an incline.

She turned back along the Via Fontebella and systematically checked every option along the route.

The facial expressions of those she questioned about her quarry forced her to repress outright laughter. By the time she paused beneath the Porta San Francesco, the snow had ceased, fading sunlight glinting over the western mountains.

Her stomach grumbled anew.

The last stop would have been the Hotel Windsor Savoia beyond the gate, had not she noticed Peters' strolling into a tobacco shop not 30 feet from where she stood.

He must've wandered down one of the alleys; otherwise, she would have passed him on the empty lane.

Slipping inside the glass door, the odor of cigars and cigarettes invaded her nostrils. At the counter, Peters intently selected stogies from a humidor as the clerk jotted prices on a pad.

"Evidently, there's no language barrier when it comes to smoking," Mustang quipped.

His head whipped toward her so quickly, she thought it might snap clean off his neck. The hefty cigar in his hand crumbled into slivers when his fist clenched.

Much to the chagrin of the employee. A stream of warnings about paying for damaged goods was silenced by the 20 Euro note she laid on his palm.

She led Peters from the establishment, wedging him against a stone wall beside the entrance.

"What the devil?" he barked, no longer the meek invalid.

"I could ask the same," she asserted. "How 'bout we enjoy an early dinner, Mr. Peters, while you tell me just what in hell you and your nephew have up your sleeves?"

His effort to feign innocence failed. "Me nephew?"

"He's been arrested, you know."

"I..."

She steered him into the restaurant on the opposite corner, practically slamming him onto a straight-backed chair at the corner table.

"Why so rough, Missy?" he rumbled.

"Because I feel kind of protective about this city, and when two miscreants start causing trouble..."

"Trouble? Who?"

“You, and that nephew of yours.”

“I don’t know anything about a nephew...”

The floorboards shifted ominously as she clenched her teeth. Peters attempted to rise; fingers strengthened by nature held him on the padded seat.

“Now, let me make this perfectly clear,” Mustang snarled. “You lie to me once more, and you’ll be dead on the spot.”

“Don’t toy with me, Missy...”

Water goblets on the table shattered. “You want to press your luck?”

Brown orbs wide behind ochre-tinted lenses, Peters acquiesced. “All right, all right.”

A bemused waiter in white shirt and purple apron rushed over to clear away shards of crystal. He muttered to himself; Mustang managed a weak grin.

“Don’t worry, friend,” she assured him, settling on her chair. “It was just a tremor.”

“I lived through the last tremors,” the lad whimpered, “and the earthquake that went with them.”

She couldn’t confess to being the cause of that disaster more than a decade earlier, when she’d accidentally drawn St. Francis from his tomb.

Once he withdrew, the woman favored Peters with a solemn glare. “You were saying?”

“Where should I start?” He folded and unfolded the white linen napkin.

“At the beginning, of course.”

“So ye can tell the peelers?”

“I have no love for the authorities, and avoid them whenever possible.”

“Ye are on the lamb, too?”

She recognized the conniving glint in his eyes, having seen it countless times since... “Oh, no, buddy. Don’t even go there.”

The strapping waiter reappeared with a tray bearing sparkling glasses and silverware. “Are you ready to order?”

“Two ravioli al forno, and a bottle of your finest chianti,” Mustang stated.

“Si, Signora.”

She hiccuped with mirth as he vanished into the kitchen.

“What’s so funny?” breathed Peters.

“We evidently have a married look.”

Thin lips curled in an angled smile, revealing straight white teeth. “I’m twice your age, innit I?”

“Not quite.” She’d celebrated her 30th birthday the previous month, though she sometimes felt 80. The mirror hung among patterned wallpaper confirmed she retained the looks of a teenager.

In spite of the turmoil she’d endured, her face hadn’t changed one iota since she’d killed Jack Parsons.

But, then, when she visited that renowned scientist in Scotland, he hadn’t aged since the day, in 1952, when the FBI had staged his death in a Pasadena garage.

Conversation didn’t resume until the waiter had delivered the wine, allowing Peters to sample it before filling the glasses.

“Proceed with the truth, Mr. Peters,” she pressed.

“Fine.” He stiffened on the chair. “I flew to Rome last week, after me brother died.”

“He worked for the British Embassy?”

His nose twitched. “‘ow’d ye... Oh, never mind. Two years me junior, Maurice entered the diplomatic service straight out of Cambridge. ‘e was assigned to the embassy in Rome, where ‘e met and married a local gal, and Riccardo was born less than a year later.”

When he hesitated, she urged, “Go on.”

“Maurice was promoted through the ranks from the mail room to the undersecretary of some department during ‘is tenure with the agency. We didn’t keep in close contact, since I was considered the black sheep of the family and... well...”

“Spent time in prison?” she hinted.

He nodded.

“Is that why you’re packing?”

Self-consciously, he rotated his left shoulder. “Anyway, I’m paroled just before Christmas and was ‘oled up in Bristol, innit I, when me mum sent word about Maurice’s ‘eart attack. She couldn’t make the trip, being on dialysis, so she bought me the ticket.”

“What were you in for?”

“Burglary, fraud, assault, extortion...”

“You act like you’re proud of it.”

His expression hardened. “I’m the best at what I do, innit I? If some little weasel ‘adn’t grassed on me to the coppers...”

“Calm down, calm down.” She patted his trembling hand. “You want to give yourself another heart attack?”

He breathed deeply before continuing. "So, I get to Rome, and Riccardo fetches me at the airport. The kid is the spittin' image of me in me prime. And not just 'is looks. 'e confides in me that 'is dad's 'eart attack was triggered by the local goons - what are they called, Carabinieri? - accusin' the boy of counterfeitin'."

"So, what happened?"

Peters sipped his wine. "When the coppers come in the front door, 'e 'oofs it out the back and over the wall. 'e lays low until 'e sees on the telly that Maurice died. Not 'ard in such a huge city, with 'is dark hair and short stature. What is it they say: all Italians look alike?"

Mustang sucked air..

"The coppers tried to nab 'im at the funeral service, but 'e slipped through the crowd as the coffin was being loaded in the 'earse. I didn't know, innit I, 'e'd stuffed a roll of fake bills in me coat pocket, and I nearly got arrested meself."

"Being a repeat offender..."

"I could've been sent to the boom for life," he sighed.

She echoed, "The boom?"

"Sorry. The boom and mizzen: prison."

Ignoring the Cockney slang, she persisted, "Why come to Assisi?"

"To 'ide out until the 'eat's off, why else?"

Plates of delectable pasta were set before them, Parmesan cheese grated over the steaming entrees.

"Will there be anything else?" inquired the waiter.

Mustang instructed, "Tiramisu for dessert."

"Si, Signora."

Peters chuckled with her before sobering. He chewed the ravioli, savoring the taste. "Good food, innit?"

"Indeed."

"'ow do ye do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make yourself understood by Italians when ye speak English?"

She squirmed on the seat. "I've... lived here long enough, it just comes naturally."

No lie.

His furrowed brow certified he didn't believe her.

They ate in silence briefly before Peters queried, "Ye *are* on the lamb, aren't ye?"

"That's not the purpose of this... discussion. You're supposed to be confiding what you're up to here in Assisi."

“Nuffin’, truly.”

She warned, “Remember what I said.”

Once nimble hands signaled submission. “I’m simply plyin’ me trade, innit I?”

“As a thief?”

No response.

“Robbing jewelry stores?” She envisioned his clumsy technique that very afternoon, spilling pastries on the shop’s counter and brushing the lot into the waxed paper bag.

Peters concentrated on his meal.

“And passing phony money?”

A vehement edge claimed his Cockney baritone. “That wasn’t me doin’. When Riccardo stuffed the fake bills in me pocket, I ‘ad no way of knowin’... I thought they were the genuine article.”

“So, when you caught up to him here, you... returned the favor?”

“Why not? I’m not doing bird on his account.”

Her brain had started to translate the slang. “But, you’ve no problem with him spending a few years in the boom?”

“‘e’s... worse than I ever was, Missy. ‘e’s not only suspected for counterfeitin’, ‘e killed a man in cold blood.”

“Who?”

“Accordin’ to what the grasshoppers told ‘is mum, the bloke who etched the plates for the bills.”

“Tragic.”

As the waiter brought two portions of Tiramisu, Mustang noticed a grainy photo on a sheet tucked into his apron pocket.

A surveillance image of Peters from Piazza del Comune cameras.

“Oh, hell...”

“What?” Peters muttered between bites.

“Do you trust me?”

“I... I don’t have a reason, innit I?”

“I think the proprietor has notified the Carabinieri...”

“Blimey!”

“Don’t get riled...”

“But, ye are...”

“We’re just a happily married couple enjoying our dinner.”

When a cadre of police rushed through the door, they discovered a family of six at a rectangular table near the windows, and a twenty-something pair tenderly holding hands in the corner.

III

“I swear, he was sitting there not 30 seconds ago!” mewed the waiter when the officials collared him.

“False reporting carries a heavy fine, Signore,” rumbled the sergeant.

“He must’ve fled when he saw you...” The young man marched toward Mustang. “They must’ve seen him!”

“Seen who?” she cooed.

“Ah, they are on their honeymoon,” scoffed the detail’s second-in-command. “They see nothing but each other.”

Once the squad stormed from the restaurant, the waiter collapsed on the nearest chair, shaken.

Mustang presented him with 40 Euros to cover their check. “Next time, don’t get involved,” she hissed.

When he raised his head, they were gone.

Outdoors, night had fallen. Carabinieri idly searched neighborhood storefronts and alleys by moonlight, suspecting Peters hid nearby.

“Where are you staying?” Mustang inquired.

“I moved from the ‘otel Giotto to the ‘otel Sorella Luna so Riccardo couldn’t find me.”

A short distance up the Via Frate Elia, they settled in Peters’ comfortable second floor suite overlooking the stone courtyard.

“How do you afford such luxury?” the woman wondered.

He shrugged noncommittally.

“Where’s the jewelry you stole?”

“Nowhere ye can find it.”

Mustang tired of being polite, of his game. She’d saved him once; the Carabinieri could be on the threshold in seconds if she willed it so.

A black leather satchel tucked beneath the double bed rattled.

“What the devil?”

She rose and retrieved the bag. “It’s your guilty conscience crying out for forgiveness.” Popping the clasp, the contents astounded her. “Damn, dude!”

An expensive collection of silver pendants, gold rings, diamond bracelets, sapphire, emerald and ruby earrings spilled onto the white quilt. She estimated their worth in the thousands of Euros.

Peters cowered on the blockish sofa.

“Did you plan to fence this stash here, or smuggle it back to England?”

“Me plan was to make me way north, hitting the Riviera, Marseilles, Paris, maybe Amsterdam...”

Mustang sank on the mattress, realization dawning. “Is your brother really dead or, better, do you even have a brother?”

“Of course I do! ‘e’s... still in the intensive care unit at Ospedale Santo Spirito, in stable condition last I checked.”

“Then, you flew to Rome why?”

“Me sister-in-law begged me to come and straighten Riccardo out, before ‘e ended up... like me.”

“And the story about the funeral...”

“Is partially true, innit? The man Riccardo killed...”

Bric-a-brac from the shelves above a mahogany desk shattered on the floor.

“What the...”

Mustang straightened. “I told you not to lie...”

Peters bolted upright as invisible fetters bound his bony wrists and ankles. “Ye can’t...”

She crossed, standing nose-to-Romanesque nose with him. “Oh, yes, I can.”

He managed to clamp onto the fur trim of her parka’s hood. “I’ll give you anythin’. A share of the bees...”

“I don’t abide criminals. Those I’ve known ended up dead.”

Terror widened the thief’s brown eyes, spectacles quivering. He recoiled, releasing her, fighting to reach inside his tweed sport coat for his pistol.

His howl as the weapon melted, a scalding stream of metal flowing down his torso and legs, shook the rafters.

“Serves you right, dammit.”

Footsteps on the stairs preceded banging on the numbered door. When neither moved to grant the Carabinieri access, the panel was kicked inward.

Rick Peters stood, alone, third degree burns crippling any hope of flight.

“Call an ambulance!” shouted the sergeant, restoring the jewelry to the satchel. “Signore Peters, you are under arrest!”

All the man could mutter was, “Thank ye, thank ye.”

No one heard Mustang's snicker, unseen in the tiny bathroom.

If one criminal regretted his misdeeds and reformed, using her power might be worth it.

About the younger...

"You should have listened to your gut," scolded Francis of Assisi when she shed her parka in the chill flat and heated a pan of milk for hot cocoa. "You should have distanced yourself from the situation."

"Do you honestly believe the Carabinieri would have captured him on their own?"

"They would have caught him a lot sooner if you hadn't..."

"I had to get at the truth!"

"You're not judge and jury, Signorina..."

Mustang mixed sugar and cocoa into the boiling liquid. "If I can protect the people of your city from being victimized..."

Francis threw up his hands in despair.

"I know, I know," his companion sniffed. "I lack self-control."

"If you had diligently strove to achieve that goal, you could still be in Montana, or Scotland..."

She sat at the kitchenette table, warming frozen digits on the ceramic mug. "Don't remind me! I'd love nothing better than to be taking care of my horses..."

"Or the hundreds your father would have left you in his will."

She stifled a sob. "No, he saw me as a failure. I never would've..."

"It's too late to resolve that situation," Francis admitted. "You can still rectify this... mess."

"How?"

"As we speak, Signore Peters' heart is failing, due to the intense pain from the burns."

"You expect me to heal him?" Mustang raged, shards of fired clay landing on the floor.

"So justice will be served."

"If he's dead, the result will be just as final. The shops will get back their goods..."

"And those who accepted the counterfeit money?"

She exhaled loudly. "I don't have that kind of scratch."

"You don't, but he does."

"Eh?"

"You noticed his shoulder holster, but didn't see the money belt fastened around his waist..."

“How much?”

“What he pilfered from the poor boxes and another ten thousand Euros.”

“Where’d he get...” She mopped brown puddles from the table with a tea towel. “He robbed a bank.”

“What you call an automated teller machine, while he waited for the train in Foligno. Some code he learned in prison, that overrides the security system.”

Her guffaw might’ve woke the neighbors. “So much for rehabilitation!”

Tossing sharp fragments of the cup into the trash basket, and sweeping splinters from the boards, Mustang debated alternatives.

“Francis, don’t the cops have the cash? I mean, if they searched him...”

“He concealed it in the sofa while you were inspecting the gems.”

“That bastard!” She grabbed the parka off the battered love seat. “Do you think I can sneak into the hospital at this hour?”

“Signorina, you can make yourself invisible!”

She shuffled toward the stairs, dejected. “Right.”

The hike to Peters’ hotel, where she gained access while the desk attendant dozed with the television droning some Italian chat show, wearied Mustang. Flipping square cushions off the couch, she extricated an overstuffed canvas money belt jammed between the springs.

The 20 and 50 Euro bills were unmistakably real, and totaled nearly 15,000 Euros.

Suitable compensation for those who’d taken a hit by the crime spree.

Reaching the Ospedale Assisi beyond the Basilica Santa Chiara and the Porta Nuova, her thighs throbbed for respite. The wall clock above the Emergency Room’s nurses’ station read 1:20 a.m. when she tiptoed past; the staff might not be able to see her, but they could still hear her.

Rick Peters lay in an intensive care suite on the third floor - not unlike his brother, Maurice, in Rome, Mustang surmised - two Carabinieri guarding the door. Wires ran from his chest to steadily beeping machinery, while intravenous tubes hooked him to plastic containers of medication and nutrients.

A doctor in green surgical scrubs, mask dangling around his neck, reviewed the patient chart at the desk. “He needs a blood transfusion,” the intruder heard.

“We’ve been calling every hospital and clinic in a 100 kilometer radius, Doctor,” murmured a lithe female. “No one has any AB-negative available.”

“Then his chances of survival...”

Mustang uttered, “Oh, hell,” aloud, causing the pair’s heads to dart right and left.

She crept from the building, cognizant she had only one course of action.

Riccardo Peters slept on the hard slab, left arm folded beneath his ear. Sneaking to the holding cell had been no problem for the visitor, since the night shift at the Carabinieri's offices consisted of a man indoors, while a skeleton crew patrolled the streets.

A silent order freed the tumblers in the lock, and she drew the wrought iron aside.

"Hey, kid," she roused him, nudging his shoulder, right hand smothering his bearded mouth.

"What the..." he gasped, eyelids fluttering.

"What's your blood type, boy?"

"Eh?"

"Pay attention, you nit. Your uncle is dying. What's your blood type?"

A further hesitation, then, "AB-negative."

"Come with me."

"But..."

She grabbed his quilted coat and jerked him to a sitting position. "Put on your shoes, dammit! Let's go!"

Confused but compliant, the young malefactor followed her toward the exit. She blocked his egress temporarily, clutching his arm to contain him within the ring of invisibility.

"How'd you do that?" Riccardo demanded as they paraded toward the Porta Nuova.

"Never mind." She stopped outside the gate. "Here's what's going to happen, and you better cooperate."

"Why should I?" He backed two paces from her. "I can go anywhere..."

"Not if you want to stay alive."

Unseen forces propelled him toward her. "What the..."

"We're going to walk into the hospital, and those stiffies will believe us to be a nurse and a willing blood donor come from Perugia. If they need to, they'll drain every ounce of red corpuscles from your body. Then, both you and the old man are going to every business you've bilked since arriving in Assisi and make restitution."

"That's impossible! The Carabinieri..."

"Will have other matters to distract them."

"How can you be so sure..."

She laid her fingers on his arm, an electric charge running through his slender frame.

He shivered, unable to escape the sensation.

“Convinced?”

His chestnut crowned head dipped.

“Behave yourself, and you might get out of this alive,” Mustang spat.

Meekly, he dogged her to the institution’s entrance. Announcing their arrival, Riccardo was escorted to the lab, where a finger prick resulted in a larger needle being inserted in his vein, dark liquid draining into a receptacle.

Despising needles, Mustang remained in the corridor. The doctor, panting from racing down two flights, poked his head into the room.

“How soon?”

“Twenty minutes,” the technician predicted.

“That’ll get him stable so we can start the surgery.”

Mustang echoed, “Surgery?”

“He has severe blockage in the coronary artery. If we don’t clear it, he’ll never live to see his trial date.”

“Oh, hell...”

The tall, muscular professional scrutinized her. “Were you upstairs an hour ago?”

“No, sir. We got here about 15 minutes ago.”

He sauntered toward the stairs. “Strange.”

He didn’t see her immediately behind him, bumping the door when it slammed shut too quickly. She comprehended that, after a previous 13 heart attacks, Peters would not survive another. Nor would he survive anesthesia and having his chest cracked open.

Breezing past the guards, she towered above the skeletal figure covered with starched white sheets. Ointment had been smeared on the charred flesh running from his armpit to his knee; no contact required for nature to restore the epidermis, she watched the deed to its completion.

An agonizing moan escaped chapped lips.

She bent to his ear. “If I finish the job, Mr. Peters, your failure to abide by my terms will mean the spontaneous combustion of your internal organs.”

“What terms?” he babbled with that bizarrely slanted mouth.

“No future criminal activity. Not so much as filching a candy bar.”

“Ow...”

“You can fly back to Britain and earn an honest living.”

“Not with me record.”

She swallowed an expletive. “Your record will be expunged.”

Calloused fingertips weakly caressed her cheek. “Ye have such... influence?”

“And, after you leave Assisi, you won’t remember ever meeting me.”

The cardiac arrest lofted him off the bed, monitors sounding alarms. The guards rushed in, nurses on their heels.

“Out of the way, idiots!” roared the doctor, nearly toppled by the crash cart an orderly shoved into the chamber.

A half-second before the charged paddles were placed on Peters’ chest, he relaxed, expression tranquil, breathing normal.

Frightened medics stared at each other, then at the beeping screens that showed a typical heart beat and blood pressure.

“What is this, some kind of miracle?” the doctor grunted.

From her place in the corner, Mustang smirked.

IV

“I want an ultrasound of his heart!” the doctor ordered as extraneous equipment was wheeled from the intensive care suite. He personally recalibrated each of the monitors, to be sure no malfunction had occurred. Then, he examined Rick Peters’ skin beneath the hospital gown, finding no traces of burns from the melted pistol. “This is insane!”

The lab technician appeared with two pints of blood. “Here they are!”

“Too little, too late,” huffed the surgeon.

“Is he dead?”

“No. He’s perfectly healthy!”

“I don’t...”

The physician brushed past him. “Neither do I. Just get those hooked up. He still needs the transfusion.”

Mustang waited until the crush of bodies in the room eased before sidling across the threshold. She expected Riccardo to be resting in the lab, and wanted to be certain he lived up to his promise.

First, she needed sleep.

Riccardo reclined on a paper-covered divan, sipping orange juice from a plastic cup. The sight of her beneath the lintel propelled him to his feet; he swayed momentarily and she clutched his arm to steady him.

En route along the hall, she discovered the young man had no accommodations booked; he’d driven to Umbria from Rome specifically to locate his uncle and cut a deal with him to avoid prosecution on the counterfeiting charges.

“But, you didn’t find him,” she speculated.

“Oh, si, I did, at the Hotel Giotto. He was eating breakfast. He embraced me like a long-lost son, then excused himself to fetch a coat from his room. He vanished from the building, leaving me to wander the streets.”

The youth had been apprehended by the Carabinieri no sooner than he tried to pass one of the phony bills at a café near San Rufino.

“You’re not much of a crook,” Mustang critiqued.

“I never suspected Uncle Rick would switch bank rolls during what I believed an expression of affection.”

“You knew he’d been in prison?”

“Si.”

“Then, it’s your own fault. You would’ve condemned a sickly ex-convict to a life sentence for not just worthless paper, but murder.”

“I have my whole life ahead of me. He... has nearly died once already.”

“Ruthless jerk,” she mumbled, yanking him by the sleeve through recessed opaque panels out to the crisp dawn.

The elder Peters, though, also qualified as ruthless, since he’d rid himself of most of the fake cash, but used the remainder to make purchases around Assisi - the entire time in possession of thousands from the ATM theft.

Riccardo might’ve been on a leash, he accompanied her so docilely through deserted lanes to her flat. Or, perhaps, he’d been cowed by her pronouncement that, if she ever saw his name - either in print or on a television screen - connected to a crime, his head would explode.

She consigned him to her bed, while she curled up on the love seat, soon snoring. Banging on the door well past noon woke her; she rolled off the cushions, muscles cramped and achy.

Carlo, the son of a souvenir shopkeeper near the Basilica Santa Chiara, allowed Rick Peters to squeeze past prior to bouncing down the stairs with 20 Euros in his fist.

“I hope to hell that’s genuine...” Mustang threatened, waving him inside.

“Until the nurse confirmed I’d been cured, I thought your presence at me bedside was a dream. Never again will I... dare...” came the Cockney pledge.

“Glad to hear it.” She limped to the kitchen counter. “Hot cocoa?”

Peters sank on the love seat. “Do ye have anythin’ stronger?”

“If you like really bad coffee.”

“No, ta.”

As she warmed the milk, she queried, “How did you escape from the hospital?”

“What makes ye think I wasn’t voluntarily released?”

“Because there were two Carabinieri guarding you.”

“Oy, right.” He shifted his weight, uncomfortable. “Well, while they were wheelin’ me for an ultrasound on me ‘eart and other tests, a linen cart toppled on one of the nurses. They were scramblin’ to clear away the mess and ‘elp her, so I was able to walk away.”

“You didn’t leave in your hospital gown,” she chided, measuring the cocoa powder.

“I... borrowed a set of scrubs from the locker room, innit I, then changed clothes when I got to the ‘otel.”

“Thanks for being honest, anyway.”

She turned with mug in hand, to be confronted by Peters, jamming a revolver in her midsection. She chuckled lightly. “I see you fetched other personal items from your room, too.”

“Somethin’ was missin’, innit,” he growled. “I think ye ‘ave it ‘ere.”

He referred to the money belt, of course. Since he’d already violated his oath, she wasn’t ready to surrender the cash. Sitting at the kitchenette table, she took a soothing gulp of chocolate delight.

Hovering over her, he pressed, “C’mon, then, Missy. Don’t mess around...”

Serious hazel orbs met his brown eyes. “You don’t remember what I told you last night, do you?”

“Bout what?”

“Your fate if you commit even the smallest infraction of the law.”

He snorted in disdain. “All I remember is bein’ able to take me first deep breath without pain in years.”

“You don’t remember what happened to your other gun?”

A trembling left hand patted his chest, hip and thigh, straining for the recollection.

“That’s right, Mr. Peters. If you don’t toss that pistol in the trash this instant, you won’t ever leave this room.”

His skepticism did not abate. “Ye cannot...”

“Uncle, do as she says!” Riccardo, clothes rumpled and chestnut mop matted, advised from the bedroom doorway.

“She ‘as me money, old china!”

“I recommend you listen to him, Mr. Peters. Those funds will repay the honest people you both bilked with the counterfeit bills, and the rest will be returned to the bank that owned the ATM you robbed.”

“Ye can’t!”

Riccardo slipped up behind his elder and wrenched the revolver from his grip. "You have no idea what... feats this sorceress can perform, Uncle."

Mustang sneered. "Haven't been labeled that in a long time."

"The 'ospital stiffs prattled on about me 'ealing bein' some sort of miracle," Peters droned. "Was that... ye?"

"If it was, or wasn't, doesn't matter. What matters now is that you wrap your mind around the fact you're going straight, whether you like it or not."

A memory briefly clouded his features. He removed the ochre-tinted glasses, wiping the lenses with his shirt tail, before tucking the cloth back in his trousers. "Somethin' about combustin' me internal organs, innit..."

"There it is!" the woman praised.

The younger Peters sighed in relief. "It's for the best, Uncle. We can put our combined talents to good use in legitimate business."

Mustang deposited her mug in the sink. "Pour yourself a bowl of cereal, kid."

Peters plopped on the nearest chair. "Ye have destroyed me, Missy."

"No, sir. I have resurrected you. At 46, you should be looking forward to a long, rich life - not an imminent heart attack, nor a return to the boom. You have an opportunity to do what millions would give their right arm to do."

"I..."

Having shoveled the crunchy contents of a soup bowl in his mouth, Riccardo slurped water from the tap before wiping his face on the tea towel hooked above the sink. "Come, Uncle. We must make our restitution, then I'll drive you to Rome for your flight back to London."

The pair's eyes met, and Mustang detected the unspoken message between them. An unseen hand on her shoulder quashed her scathing tirade.

"Fine, Francis," she murmured. "It's on their heads."

The Peters' joint, quizzical expressions at this statement sparked a wry chuckle.

"You will join us on our circuit around the city?" asked Riccardo.

"Sure," she replied. "Give me a few minutes to shower and change clothes..."

Peters spouted, "What about the Carabinieri? If they see us roamin'..."

"They won't recognize you." She started toward the bedroom.

"While we wait, if ye turn over the lolly, we can count out 'ow much we owe each shop..."

She plucked her parka from where it had fallen earlier in the day, extracting the money belt from the pocket in which she'd stuffed it. Peters seized it like a child reclaiming a long lost toy.

What she suspected came to pass. She'd no more shut the bathroom door than she heard the men make their escape.

Good riddance to them, streams of hot water easing her tense joints.

Wrapped in a terry robe, auburn tresses secured in a turban-wound towel, she stripped the mattress, arranging clean linens before crawling beneath the quilt for more sleep. Strange dreams and echoes of sirens disrupted the slumber.

She awoke as the sun was setting, groaning that her daily routine would not resume its regular cycle for at least a week, thanks to Rick Peters. She would have no choice but to sit around and read books, or play chess with St. Francis into the wee hours.

In the meantime, ravenous, she craved nourishment. A few trattoria near the Piazza Santa Chiara opened during the winter months; she would enjoy a dinner-style breakfast in peace and quiet.

Or, not.

The parka shielding her against the cold, its hood didn't shield her view from the temporary barriers blocking the piazza against pedestrian and vehicle traffic. A squad of Carabinieri groveled on the stones, scraping evidence into plastic bags by the light of bright torches, another snapped photos from every angle.

Mustang wedged through the spectators, greeting the shopkeeper Giovanni. "What happened?"

"Ah, Signorina, it was horrible!" the usually jovial man shuddered. "I was locking the shop for the day, when two men - father and son, from what I could tell - passed behind me at a rapid pace, bound for the Porta Nuova. Suddenly, one of them let out such a yowl of anguish, I couldn't help but turn to look. The younger one had fallen on the ground and seemed to be having a seizure or medical issue. I rushed inside to ring the Carabinieri and, when I came out, both of them lay on the stones, dead."

Not father and son, she knew. Uncle and nephew.

Criminals intent on repeating their mistakes.

Mustang edged along the barriers to the coroner's van parked near the pink marble basilica's doors. Pretending to observe the crew clearing the scene, she listened to a wiry, white-clad official in consultation with a tall, tawny-haired man.

"I don't understand it, Doctor," the coroner complained. "The cause of death is obvious for the youth - a cerebral hemorrhage - but for the other..."

“We will know for sure after the autopsy,” responded the physician.

The Carabinieri sergeant hailed both men, who traversed the piazza to where abandoned luggage marked the spot Riccardo Peters had fallen, his uncle beside him.

The van untended, Mustang hoisted herself into the compartment. She pulled musty blankets off two nearly identical faces, both contorted by the severe agony experienced at the moment of their passing.

A trickle of blood had dried below Riccardo’s ear; his brain had exploded, as she’d threatened.

She wouldn’t be surprised to learn that Rick Peter’s lungs, heart, liver, kidneys and stomach had been seared by inexplicable flames.

They’d had no desire to reform their lives.

Hearing voices approach, she restored the corpses beneath their shrouds.

“It’s not fair to let the police waste their energy searching for some elusive assailant, when no foul play is involved,” stated the coroner.

The doctor objected, “How can you be so sure?”

“The sole witness told me he saw no one else in the piazza before...”

“What if they fought with each other?”

“For what reason?”

“Fifteen thousand Euros is a pretty good reason.”

Concealed behind the van, Mustang cringed.

“Without their passports or any identification, we won’t be able to tell...” persisted the doctor.

“Their fingerprints might...”

“That will take time, if they’re foreigners.”

“True, true.”

An unyielding tug drew her away. “Come, Signorina. You were bound for the trattoria...”

She followed Francis, his torn Save the Whales t-shirt and jeans ill equipped to protect him from the freezing temperature - if he hadn’t been impervious to the weather.

A hearty meal of tortellini in meat sauce satisfied her hunger; three glasses of chianti numbed her soul. The barriers had been removed while she ate, allowing for an unimpeded trek back to the Piazza San Rufino.

She halted prior to entering the structure where she’d resided since fleeing Scotland to avoid periodic entanglements with strangers, and friends. For the most part, her years in the Umbrian city had facilitated a tranquility within her...

Her dismay at the outcome of this ludicrous fiasco dampened her cheeks with tears.

“You cannot change anyone but yourself,” came Francis’ wise counsel.

“I know, I know. Andre Desrosiers died because his rock-hard heart wouldn’t compromise... Jonas Fairchild... at least he made amends for his wrongs in the afterlife. To what torture will these two be subjected?”

“None, after your... unique resolution to their activities.”

She sagged against the stone wall. “They’ll be at peace?”

“You wish to reassure yourself that your... power was used to a positive end?”

“Halting their crime spree...”

“Once more, you positioned yourself as judge, jury...”

“And executioner,” she added.

“They are still close, if you wish to beg their forgiveness.”

She cackled, an eerie sound reverberating around the stone walls. “You know I’ve had enough of manifesting the dead - by accident or deliberately.”

“Then, content yourself the lost profits and jewelry will be restored to their rightful owners, and no others will suffer by their ignoble deeds.”

She slowly mounted dim stairs. “What about the millions of other criminals in the world?”

“Would you convict them, sight unseen, and pass a death sentence, en masse?”

“I could, you know.”

“Si, Signorina. I know far too well.” Francis opened the door for her.

“Would it achieve the goal of feeding the hungry or housing the poor?”

“It... might make it easier.”

His sardonic grin drove a dagger through her heart.

“Okay, okay. I’ll forget it.”

“Along with your memory of these men?”

“Did you see their faces? How could I ever forget?”

Prior to speaking, her ethereal guest indicated the dusty coffee table, where an errant finger had scrawled, “We don’t believe you.”

Peters.

“Remember, they made their choice after you’d warned them - twice - about the consequences. If they hadn’t died in the piazza, they would’ve endured a piteous, lingering demise in prison.”

She agreed with Francis’ assessment though, somehow, Mustang would never dispel those two sets of intense brown orbs from her mind’s eye.

She shivered with cold, firewood for the stove never collected.